James Miles on Media Coverage of Tibet

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James Miles of *The Economist* was in Tibet when the riots and protests started on March 14. China’s strict limitations on foreign journalists entering Tibet in the following days made Miles one of the few journalists who saw the riots firsthand. With all the attention being now paid to how the international media are covering the events in Tibet, we thought it would be interesting to find out how Miles felt about the questions he got upon returning from the field. Here’s how he answered us via email.

**China Beat:** Is there any question that you’ve been asked a lot since returning to Beijing that you think is off the mark or plays into simplistic or misleading thinking about a complex issue?

**James Miles:** No. The question I get asked most is what happened, and then why. What happened in Lhasa from midday on the 14th to late on the 15th did not fit the normal pattern of unrest in Tibet. It was not monk-led, it displayed little explicitly-stated political purpose, and it was violent. Reporters who interviewed me during the unrest and afterwards seemed to readily understand this. If I were a media studies specialist I’d have a very good look at this case. The foreign media were almost entirely absent from Lhasa (a couple may have sneaked in under cover after the riots broke out but would have had limited access). Yet I have seen some very good reporting on what happened, notwithstanding the Chinese media’s nitpicking. Reporting in the official press, by contrast, while reasonably on the mark as far as the violence goes, has been highly misleading by failing to look at the bigger picture of unrest in Tibet and beyond, by not asking what might have caused this anger and by portraying this as the actions of a handful of people organised by the Dalai Lama’s “clique.” It wasn’t a handful, and I saw no evidence to suggest anything other than spontaneity.

**China Beat:** Is there any question you wish you were asked? Maybe even are surprised you haven’t been asked?

**James Miles:** Again no. I found those questioning me from foreign news organisations wanted me to explain the story as I saw it. Their questions were often open-ended, putting the onus on me to tell the story as fully as I could. Some of them devoted considerable airtime and print and web space to what I told them. Nobody has asked how I felt being on my own, journalistically, in the middle of this huge story. Journalists hunt in packs on big stories, competing with each other but also cooperating with one another. Bouncing ideas off one another helps to sharpen our thinking. Having others there means that some can break away from the main story and look at what is happening on the edges. It is exhilarating being on one’s own, but this was not an exclusive of my own creation — it was the product of an environment where newsgathering is restricted.

**Tags:** 2008 Tibet